

STRANGERS
ACROSS

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THE MUSLIM OTHER IN EUROPE

ELISABETH BECKER

Muslim migrants and post-migrants in today's Europe continue to be relegated to various categories of otherness. Labelled as refugees or people with migration backgrounds, as somehow external and juxtaposed to European identities and geographies, they are met with discomfort and prejudice. By revisiting key periods in European history like the Reconquista in al-Andalus, a Freigeist project at the Max Weber Institute of Sociology of Heidelberg University seeks to understand how and why such an exclusionary rhetoric in Europe has come to focus specifically on Muslims. By shining a light on both Muslim and Jewish contributions to the making of European societies and histories, its aim is to move both from the margins to the centre of the European story.



In my first book, “Mosques in the Metropolis: Incivility, Caste, and Contention in Europe”, my interlocutors (constituents of two of Europe’s largest mosques) spoke to their experiences of being seen as uncivil on account of their “Muslimness”. They described how discomfort with “Muslimness” was invoked in relation to their religion, ethnicity, the migration of their parents/grandparents to Europe and/or a racialized notion that this negative otherness was inherent to their very beings. This included experiences in schools, being called on less by teachers or excluded from spelling bees; in work, berated for wearing headscarves or set apart from Christian and Jewish colleagues; and in everyday life – eliciting surprise when they spoke German in Berlin, or told to “go home” in the streets of London that they called home, and so often surveilled by security personnel in both.

My interlocutors in these mosques were largely the children of those who migrated as guestworkers or post-colonial migrants in the post-World War II era. Since, a plurality of Muslims have been presented by politicians and in policies as challenging a supposedly distinct European entity and identity (which is of course in reality highly plural), as incompatible or even threatening to the European order of things (a vague and subjective imaginary that shapes inclusions and exclusions). Today in Europe, Muslim migrants and post-migrants (the children and grandchildren of migrants) remain relegated to categories of otherness – “refugees”, “people with migration backgrounds” – and their stories again dominate political platforms and the news. In Germany, for instance, faced with the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, politicians across the political spectrum have asserted that the country will not and should not repeat the mistakes of its recent past, referring to the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of predominantly Muslim refugees in 2015.

Othering of Muslims then and now

To understand how and why such an exclusionary rhetoric in Europe has come to focus specifically on Muslims, including what this means for Europe’s present, we must first understand Europe’s many pasts. This is what I aim to do in my Freigeist project, “Invisible Architects: Jews, Muslims, and the Making of Europe”, which moves

Muslims and Jews from the margins to the centre of the European story. This entails unsettling the idea that Muslims and Jews are external and juxtaposed to Europe, rather than an integral part of its story and histories. I plan to begin, for instance, by looking at the period of the Reconquista in al-Andalus – what is now southern Portugal and Spain – from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, during which the forced migration of both Muslims and Jews forged myths of purity tied to Christian culture and (European) geographies.

These myths have not persisted in a linear fashion since those early years in Iberia, in a geography that now belongs to Europe, far before the idea of Europe emerged as a way of at once unifying and erecting borders. Yet throughout European history, in different discourses and forms, they have reared their ugly heads. In the twentieth century, policies based on mainstream distinction from religious minorities were used to control populations in colonial states, for instance by the French in Algeria, where a both religious and racial hierarchy cast Muslims as inferior to European colonisers, with women forcibly and publicly stripped of their veils. And such policies are now seen in the othering of Muslims who migrated (or are the children/grandchildren of those who migrated) in the post-colonial and post-imperial era: a period in which European nation-states cast blame outwards rather than confronting their internal shame, failing to implicate themselves in the brutality, bloodshed – the very impetus for emigration that resulted from colonial projects and their subsequent demise. Whether distinguishing through religion, ethnicity, culture, or racialisation, an otherness in the form of the (mythic) singular, essentialised Muslim has been posed as incompatible with a (mythic) singular, essentialised Europe; and it has been

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Freigeist-Fellowship

Der Beitrag von Elisabeth Becker behandelt ein Forschungsvorhaben im Rahmen des Freigeist-Fellowships der VolkswagenStiftung. Das Programm der Stiftung richtet sich an exzellente Nachwuchswissenschaftler*innen, die außergewöhnlichen Forschungsprojekten zwischen etablierten Forschungsfeldern nachgehen und dabei auch risikobehaftete Wissenschaft betreiben möchten. Die Fellows sollen neue Wege gehen, Freiräume nutzen und auch Widerstände überwinden. Ziel ist es, neue Horizonte zu erschließen und kritisches Analysevermögen mit außergewöhnlichen Perspektiven und Lösungsansätzen zu verbinden. Freigeist-Fellows sollen so „zum Katalysator für die Überwindung fachlicher, institutioneller und nationaler Grenzen“ werden.

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mined and subsequently fortified by far-right nationalist ideologies which do not idealise Europe but instead idealise distinct European states, states. Examples are the views espoused by the Front National in France, or the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

The stranger within

The threads of these myths are tied to the challenges faced by and in Europe today, challenges often framed in terms of migration, and yet challenges endemic to the very ambiguous form of the European nation-state and equally to the idea of Europe itself. In my previous research on mosque communities in London and Berlin, I have argued that the form of “the Muslim” has become interchangeable with that of what sociologist Georg Simmel once termed “the stranger”. As Simmel wrote,

A stranger is not a wanderer, who may come today and leave tomorrow. He comes today – and stays. He is a potential wanderer: although he has not moved on from the society, he has not quite shed the freedom to stay or go, either. He remains within a specific place, but he has not always belonged to it, and so he carries into it qualities that do not, could not, belong there.

The stranger (today the Muslim) who can never fully belong, is accused of unsettling – through their very movement, their very being – the myth of a static order of things, a culture forged by (Christian) Europeans.

As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote, building on this idea, “The stranger’s unredeemable sin is, therefore, the incompatibility between his presence and other presences fundamental to the world order; his simultaneous assault on several crucial oppositions instrumental in the incessant effort of ordering.” And yet this accusation of disorder-making is easily revealed as inside out – as what the migrant, the stranger, the Muslim unsettles is the myth itself: there is no such thing as an unmoved, unmoving Europe. Europe has always been dynamic and plural. Muslims, like Jews, have always resided at once inside and outside of Europe’s geographical and cultural bounds, and therefore also contributed to the making of European societies.

In trying to understand how Muslims have come to occupy this illuminating, unsettled place in Europe, and in “the West” more broadly, philosopher Anne Norton turns to the so-called “Muslim Question” that evokes the “Jewish Question” prior. In so doing, she describes a knot of hierarchies related to culture, ethnicity, and race (I would emphatically add religion to this list) that have cast Muslims into a position of subjugation and inferiority, as they seek to make a place for themselves in modern Europe. Yet forms of differentiation setting Jews and Muslims apart have arguably been invoked not only in modernity, but since the Middle Ages. So we may begin in the white-washed houses of al-Andalus with their towering cypress trees, lit by the unforgiving sun. And we arrive in the modern European metropolis, where a

sense prevails, that there are strangers among us who we cannot know and we cannot trust, who are here to shatter, rather than share, our dreams.

A European question

Recognising the presence of this fear and yet also transcending it, I now seek through my Freigeist project to move away from both “the Muslim Question” and “the Jewish Question” and to instead focus on what religious studies scholar Gil Andijar has termed “the European Question”, leaning into the discomfiting reality that Europe continues to turn against its religious minorities, old and

new, rather than face its own uncertainties: that European societies have long projected ambiguity onto internal others, the stranger within, without which Europe cannot imagine itself. And yet in an arguably dark narrative where time has not erased the power of mythical otherness, even if it has transformed it, rays of light illuminate. These strangers, Muslims and Jews, have rooted themselves on unsettled grounds. Being both inside and outside, part of and set apart from Europe, the stranger sees a horizon beyond the societally sanctioned stories of who “we” are; and the stranger makes such alternative visions not only visible to others, but possible. The stranger thus

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FREMDE DURCH DIE JAHRHUNDERTE

DAS MUSLIMISCHE „ANDERE“ IN EUROPA

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Dieser Beitrag stellt die sogenannte „muslimische Frage“ in Europa neu, indem er die europäische Tendenz hinterfragt, religiöse, ethnische, kulturelle und rassifizierte Formen des „Othering“ zu verbinden und damit interne „Andere“ oder „Fremde“ zu schaffen. Er bezieht sich auf die Ergebnisse jahrelanger ethnographischer Forschung in zwei städtischen Moscheen Europas, die beleuchtet, wie Muslime in Europa versuchen, ihren Platz in einer feindlichen Gesellschaft zu finden, und führt dabei ihre Erfahrungen – und die Herausforderungen, denen sie sich gegenübersehen – auf eine lange Geschichte hierarchischer Ordnungen zurück, die Muslimen und Juden im heutigen Europa eine untergeordnete Rolle zuweisen.

Die Autorin verbindet ethnographische und historische Untersuchungen, um die zahlreichen miteinander verwobenen Differenzierungen aufzuzeigen, mithilfe derer Muslime und Juden vom al-Andalus des Mittelalters bis in die Gegenwart hinein als Fremde klassifiziert werden – und das, so die Autorin, obwohl sie beileibe keine Außenseiter, sondern ein ganz wesentlicher Bestandteil der europäischen Geschichte sind. Des Weiteren legt die Autorin nahe, dass die Marginalisierung, der sich ihre Gesprächspartner in europäischen Moscheen ausgesetzt sehen, sie nicht einfach zu Opfern macht, sondern ihnen eine besondere Handlungsmacht verleiht: die Fähigkeit, als selbstverständlich geltende Annahmen über die kulturellen Grenzen Europas infrage zu stellen – eines Kontinents, der seit jeher pluralistisch ist und von seinen religiösen Minderheiten mitgeschaffen und mitgeprägt wird. ●

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„Der Fremde ermöglicht uns einen umfassenderen Blick auf das, was ist, was war und was sein könnte: Europa als Ort der Vielfalt in Gegenwart und Zukunft, wie er es in der Vergangenheit war.“



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allows us to see more fully what is, what has been, and what could be: Europe as a place of plurality in the present and future, as in the past. As scholar of Islamic thought Ebrahim Moosa asserts, “that experience [of strangerhood] allows one to see things – to view things in a way that a domesticated or complacent gaze may fail to observe.”

Turning back to my book, “Mosques in the Metropolis”, I recall how my interlocutors (as many others) pushed back against unfounded assumptions about who they are and what Europe is or should be. Over years of research in mosques I learned the often untold histories of how Muslims contribute to the shaping, the making of what we now call Europe: not only its boundaries, but its languages, its universities, its architecture, and the plurality at its very core. My interlocutors’ stories – human stories of hoping and rooting, of finding strength in religious teachings and cultural traditions, of pushing back against stereotypes regarding Muslim life in the urban centres of Europe and far-beyond – transcended dominant discourses of otherness, strangeness, incompatibility. What emerged instead were stories in which cultures, and the people who inhabit them, neither clash nor coalesce, but rather converge in conversations that spur new forms of life, while they speak to old dreams – like those of Convivencia, and the raw yearning for dignity that we all share. My Freigeist project will continue this conversation where they left off, exploring these contributions – moving beyond the distinctions that have set Muslims apart, to the co-constitution of European societies and their religious minorities, who have always been, and will always be, a part of Europe. ●